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# REVISITING ALVAR AALTO: A RE-READING OF THE LEGACY OF FERNANDO TÁVORA THROUGH THE LENS OF JAPANESE CULTURE

Maria João Moreira Soares and João Miguel Couto Duarte

“For us, it was possible that, at the time, A[lvar] A[alto] was the character that appears as God to resolve tragedy: a prestigious figure solving the problems we were facing.” Fernando Távora [1, p. 25-26, our translation]

Fernando Távora (1923-2005), a decisive figure for the renewal of the Modern Movement in Portugal in the latter half of the 20th century, thus indicated, in a 1986 interview, the boundaries of understanding of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) in the 1950s at the Porto School of Architecture, where he was a professor. Thirty years later, Távora concluded that Aalto’s work was perhaps seen as a fashion – a formal trend – more than as a structured movement. Álvaro Siza Vieira (b. 1933), Távora’s professed disciple, was one of the exceptions to Távora’s conclusion on the understanding of Aalto’s work.

Távora’s observations are reason enough for reflection on the relationship between his own understanding of architecture and the work of Aalto. In the same interview, Távora confirmed that he “discovered that he had certain affinities with him” [1, p. 25, our translation]. While acknowledging Távora’s critique of the formalistic approximations to the work of the Finnish architect, it is also worthwhile looking at an approximation to Japan and its culture, an interest in which the two men shared. The importance of Japan for Aalto is well known. The motivation Távora first had for taking an interest in Japan was his general interest in the world, an interest he developed as a student and the same interest that led him to the work of Aalto.

## Japan connecting architects

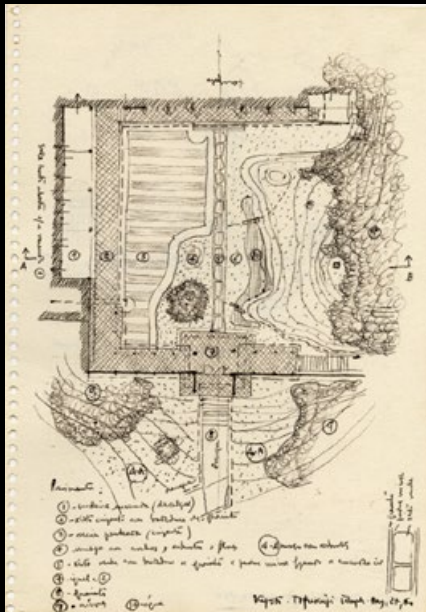
Távora’s first contacts with the work of Aalto and with contemporary Japanese architecture occurred simultaneously. While still a student of architecture at the Porto School of Fine Arts (EBAP), Távora first came into contact with the latter through books he began purchasing in 1945. His concern at the time was with the need for architecture to incorporate tradition, and to thus respond to modernity, a condition necessary for its humanisation to be made operational. In two of those books – the 1944 edition of *The Modern House in America* by James Ford (1884-1944) and Katherine Morrow Ford (1905-1959), and *Built in USA: 1932-1944* by Eliza-

beth Mock (1911-1998), also from 1944 – Távora dwelt on the House in Fellowship Park in Los Angeles, California, designed by Harwell Hamilton Harris (1903-1990), a work that was clearly influenced by Japanese culture. In a third book, *The New Architecture* by Alfred Roth (1903-1998), published in 1946, Távora highlighted the Japanese pavilion for the 1937 International Exposition in Paris by Junzō Sakakura (1901-1969). The latter book also contained Aalto's Viipuri Library (1927-1935). Of the various books on Japan that Távora purchased, *The Japanese House and Garden*, published in 1955, by Tetsurō Yoshida (1894-1956) – who had travelled throughout Europe and the USA in 1931 and 1932 on a Japanese government mission – proved to be particularly important, the book being the English language version from 1955 of the new 1954 edition of *Das Japanische Wohnhaus* [The Japanese House], which was first published in 1935. Another important purchase was the new edition from 1958 of *Houses and People of Japan* (first published in 1937) by Bruno Taut (1880-1938), who had lived for some time in Japan. In 1960 Távora visited Japan to take part in the WoDeCo conference in Tokyo. The visit was one part of a four-month-long journey which had already taken him to the USA and Mexico and was still to take him to Thailand, Pakistan, Egypt and Greece. In addition to Tokyo, Távora got to know Nikkō, Kyoto and Nara. His interest in Japan was to persist well beyond this visit, and he also acknowledged the presence of Japan in some of his works.

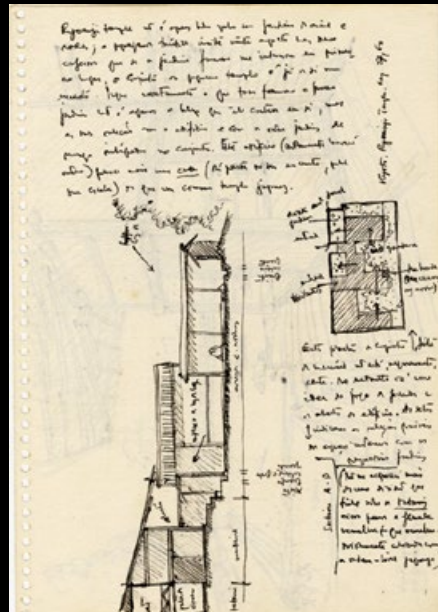
## Parallel paths to Japan

Aalto's approximation to Japan was based on diverse personal contacts and readings throughout the 1930s. By 1935 his interest had become consolidated enough for him to reference Japan and the tradition that marked its culture in his speech to the annual meeting of the Swedish Society of Industrial Design in Stockholm. Of his personal contacts, it is important to mention Erik Gunnar Asplund (1885-1949), to whom Aalto was close and whom he visited several times in Stockholm. Asplund met Yoshida in 1931, and proclaimed that same year that European architects should adopt the flexibility of the Japanese house [2, p. 53]. Given this context, it is likely that Aalto had already had access to Yoshida's *Das Japanische Wohnhaus*, published in German in 1935, of which he was to acquire a copy of the new edition of 1954. He also owned Taut's *Houses and People of Japan*, published in 1937, which was gifted to him by Hugo Valvanne (1894-1961), who was then the Finnish Chargé d'Affaires in Japan. Less well known, but by no means less important, were Aalto's contacts with Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and, in particular, Antonin Raymond (1888-1976), who lived and worked in Japan from 1921 to 1938. Raymond gifted Aalto his own book of 1938, *Architectural Detail*, when Aalto visited New York that same year [3, p. 113]. Raymond's book featured details of his build-

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- 1 Japan – Kyoto, Tofukuji Temple. Drawing, unsigned but dated: 17. 05.1960.  
Bic pen on paper (31,5x24,6cm) FIMS/FT/VJapão-0009
- 2 Japan – Kyoto, Ryoanji Temple. Drawing, unsigned but dated: 11. 06.1960.  
Bic pen on paper (31,5x24,6cm) FIMS/FT/VJapão-0026
- 3 Journey to Finland. Rogério Cavaca and Cecília Cavaca, Fernando Távora, Helena Trindade, Álvaro Siza and Camilo Soares. [Helsinki], 1968.  
Print, b/w, 15,6x23,3cm. FIMS/FT/foto0002

ings in Japan, in which he combined Western and Japanese aesthetics. On some of their visits to the USA, Alvar and Aino Aalto (1894-1949) had the opportunity to become acquainted with the recent architecture of the west coast, which revealed an absorption of Japanese culture. The work of Charles Greene (1868-1957) and Henry Greene (1870-1954) clearly reflected said absorption. In 1939 the Aaltos paid a visit to the Japanese pavilion and garden at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco, of which they took several photographs. Paradoxically, Aalto never managed to visit Japan. However, amongst the Western architects influenced by the architecture of that country, one can consider Aalto to have internalised the identity characteristics of Japanese architecture in the most profound and subtle way. Although less referenced, the Maison Louis Carré in Bazoches-sur-Guyonne, France, which was completed in 1961, is an expression of that internalisation.

Alvar Aalto and Fernando Távora discovered Japan via parallel paths, albeit with a time difference of three decades between them. They are paths that began with the possession and reading of the same referential books – those of Yoshida and Taut; paths that were welcomed by a certain type of North American architecture, both that which praised a return to the vernacular and that which revealed a Japanese influence; paths that were realised through travels to the USA and Japan – although only Távora travelled to the latter country. Both Aalto and Távora were motivated by the desire for a homely architecture, as they were discontented with some of the more extreme Modernist architecture in which the unhomely was evident. For Aalto, achieving a homely architecture necessarily meant incorporating nature, and it is here that one can possibly find the presence of one of the fundamental principles of traditional Japanese architecture. Whilst this was perhaps not a fundamental issue in his architecture, Távora nevertheless appreciated the relationship with nature he discovered on his visit to Japan, to which many of the drawings he made there are a testament (Fig. 1; Fig. 2).

In a sentence that could have been used by Távora, Aalto wrote in relation to the traditional architecture of Japan: “Their contact with nature and the ever-enjoyable variation it produces is a way of life that makes them reluctant to dwell too long on formalistic concepts.” [4, p. 93]

Távora visited Finland in 1968, in the company of Álvaro Siza and other friends (Fig. 3). They paid a visit to Aalto’s studio in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki. Aalto welcomed them. The conversation lasted an hour. Aalto “made a point of talking about Portugal, which he had only visited once, almost in clandestinely. And of Spain and

Morocco – the southern countries he loved so much”, as Álvaro Siza recently shared with the authors.

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